

EUROPA EXÓTICA

With *Europa exótica* (2020-21), Nathalie Perret presents a set of objects made in black and white earthenware whose typology is similar to still lifes, vanities (skulls, bones, funerary urns), and collections of curiosities (flowers, fruits, shells). We are first struck by the finesse and precision of the work: the grooves of the shells, the volumes and the skin grain of the round fruits, the roughness of the jaws. Then, by its sobriety: no enamel, no slip, the clay is raw, in ebony or ecru colours. The black objects (*Vasija mandíbula*, *Vasija Caracolas*, *Vasija Gran Caracola*) are patinated with Indian ink. The pale objects are for some of them curiously scratched, and our eye is quickly caught by these fine tight lines running through the curves of the shells, the cavities of the skulls, the edges of the vases (*Conchas*, *huesos con chicle*, *Europa exótica*, *Fraîcheur de vivre*). One recognizes the energetic back and forth movements that one make with the fingers to cover a surface with a fine tip. These irregular lines were produced using Bic, these inexpensive ballpoint pens displayed on supermarkets shelves during back-to-school season. Sometimes with sparse spots, sometimes almost entirely, like a coloring with few touches missing to be completed. Some pieces are covered with this ink, which disguises the neutral and sober color of the clay with a bright and iridescent dress (*Conchas*). To achieve this the artist extracts the plastic tubes which are in the transparent case of the pen and blows into it; she carries out this meticulous work repetitively and gradually collects the liquid. This is how she obtains this rich, powdery night-blue tint with an eggplant reflection, almost brown.

Cracked Vanitas

Nathalie Perret works with earthenware like paper.

From this simple process, it produces critical, facetious, poetic displacements. First, by choosing to stubbornly collect ink, she shifts its function from writing to drawing and painting and reveals its aesthetic quality. The specific colouring of Bic blue, the metallic reflection we see when we write, is expanded, exalted by the round reliefs of urns, flowers and shells. The artist unfolds and flattens the loops that form the words, to draw abstract lines. Far from the academic discipline of dictation, these flourishing streaks are a tribute to doodling. They are no longer aligned on the surface of the sheet by a gesture linked to learning, but dotted on the rounding of objects for pure graphic pleasure, stubborn scratches which evoke some minimalist drawings.

The approach also consists in infiltrating objects in a performative way. By applying a manual and even oral extraction process to the pen, Nathalie Perret indeed disrupts the industrial production method of color (which is patented). It is thus her own bodily fluids that she breathes into the standardized liquid. She plays on value and elegance, disturbs them, infiltrating the mineral matter of foreign bodies. This organic imprint is also reflected in the presence of a few pink chewing gums which discreetly linger on a femur, on the edge of a bowl or a shell. The chewing, the saliva, the waste evoked by the small pink and soft forms belittle the ceramic and its delicacy. In addition with the Conchas, the artist also plays on the double meaning of the Spanish word: the conch, mollusk with large bivalve shell, and the pussy in the sense of vulva in the familiar language, sometimes used as an insult. The sparse and irreverent presence of silver coins bearing the effigy of the Smurfette – the ridiculous coquetry of the character, the incongruity of the blue skin – makes a final mockery of the nobility or preciousness that one would like to lend to these objects.

Another formal pattern runs through *Europa exótica*, it is the crack, which prolongs and digs the cross-outs to create an aperture. Nathalie Perret indeed decided to keep track of accidents that happen during cooking, when the clay breaks or chips. These events sometimes manifest themselves as thin cracks (Conchas), sometimes as more scarred breakages (*Europa exótica*); sometimes whole parts were detached (*Vasija craneo y*

chicle). It is also from her own gesture of making that the artist lets appear fallibility. Failure.

Yawning towards the past

Nathalie Perret's work is informed by an interest in the «colonization of knowledge»¹, and¹ refers to the theme of transculturation and interbreeding, to their role in the history of modes of representation of knowledge. The *Europa exótica* series contains multiple references to the indigenous plants and knowledge of Latin America which have been appropriated by Europe. Mangoes and cacao fruits are also memories of her childhood.

To create *Europa exotica*, the artist relied on the study of some paintings produced as part of the colonial expeditions of the Spanish empire in South America. Especially by Vicente Albán, an Ecuadorian painter belonging to the Quito school, who was commissioned by the Spanish naturalist José Celestino Mutis to produce illustrations of Ecuadorian human types and botanical specimens. In 1783, the painter created a set of six paintings (currently in the collections of the Museo de América in Madrid), which represent side-by-side baskets of exotic fruits (medlars, grenadilles, naranguilles...), animals, and caricatural human types, supposedly representative of indigenous Ecuadorian populations: members of the elite, Yumbos Indians, Black slaves. These paintings operate both as epistemological compendia (descriptions of nature, illustrations of botanical discoveries and media for the dissemination of knowledge) and instruments of political domination (representations of population categories and their hierarchy).

¹ An expression by which historian Samir Boumediene designates the role of medicinal plants in the construction of the political power relations between Europe and the «New World» between the 15th and 18th centuries. Samir Boumediene, *The colonization of knowledge. A history of the medicinal plants of the «Nouveau Monde» (1492-1750)*, Vaux-en-Velin, Éditions des Mondes à faire, 2016, 477 p.

The objects chosen by Nathalie Perret and their mode of presentation refer to such appropriation devices and cultural transfers that were articulated by colonization. *Europa exotica* and its generous shapes is a reference to the baskets that were used as a foil in Albán's paintings, but the title explains Nathalie Perret's reversal of value: Europe is a curiosity. The flowers come from the Floripondio rojo or *Brugmansia sanguinea*, called trumpet of angels or trumpet of judgment, a shrub plant of the Andes with hallucinogenic power. Chewing gum comes from chicle gum, the dried sap of sapotillier tree, native to Central America. Finally, on the edge of a black urn, a piece of pre-Columbian ceramic is placed, which works like a gap towards the past: the one that precedes the arrival of the settlers in the «Nuevo Mundo», and the childhood in Chile of Nathalie Perret. The round bellies of these funerary objects contain a collective and singular memory. These forms ultimately look at us with curiosity, vain and slashed, sumptuous and cracked.

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The ceramic flowers of Nathalie Perret represent hallucinogenic plants, used by pre-Columbian peoples in South America to travel in the invisible. The scale of these giant plants features the aboriginal representation mode in which the large size conveys divinity. With these imposing forms Nathalie Perret has chosen to show magical thinking and colonized knowledge. A second gesture is associated with the first, which is the mode of presentation used: serial, rationalized, civilized, it evokes the arrangement of specimens in the illustrated herbaria of modern botany, whose drawing techniques also use grey pencil and gouache. With these fragile branches arranged in tidy rows, a reference is made to the scientific taxonomy and the appropriation of indigenous medicinal knowledge, considered by Europeans as diabolical. The scientific classification is a form of political control, which is also recalled by the pattern of the stripe, mobilized by Nathalie Perret as it has been historically applied to the excluded and reprobates (like the prisoners). The colour of the table, pale pink, evokes the skin colour of the settler, a colour of imposed normality or neutrality

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